

Signs of the times for local painter

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CLIPPER CONTRIBUTOR

Each day brings new heights – sometimes literally – for a local businessman.

Duxbury resident Bob Okerfelt says he's always had a natural gift for painting. Over the last thirty-five years he has painted on nearly every surface imaginable. He spent twenty years working for a custom signage company, working his way into a

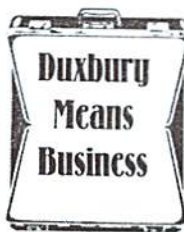
foreman position, and eventually becoming his father's boss after he closed up his own advertising business.

In the early 1970s, Okerfelt's father, Clarence, painted the Boston Gas tank. The original design was by Corita Kent, a nun, whose art work was chosen to grace the side of the now famous landmark.

With samples sealed to represent the tanks, artists in the running for the project presented their designs. Of the four artists, Kent eventually was chosen by Boston Gas and the elder Okerfelt began the rendition of her vision on the side of the tank.

"My father painted one gas tank there and three or four years later they lettered it Boston Gas," said Okerfelt.

In 1994, Boston Gas made changes in their storage configuration and Okerfelt and



Professional sign painter Bob Okerfelt works on a commission.



Okerfelt says he can "pretty much paint on anything."

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Artists

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his father hung from the scaffolds along the waterfront and repainted the design onto a newer tank, which drivers can still see next to the Expressway heading into Boston.

Okerfelt's work takes him all over the country, working on projects including truck and boat lettering, murals and other types of signage. There are dozens of projects Okerfelt has been commissioned to create.

"Illuminated signs, fronts of schools, interior and exterior of hotel chains, room numbers, there are so many kinds of project I can be working on," he said. "Every day is different."

Okerfelt is also the main artist for the Pizzeria Uno's chain, which has brought him to most of the fifty states.

His work is created using specs, or he hand designs what the company envisions for their restaurants. He has traveled throughout the country to create images for the restau-

rant chain. Okerfelt recalls being approached by Uno's then CEO, Aaron Spencer, nearly thirteen years ago while he was painting the side of a building.

Word of mouth is an invaluable part of his artistry, as he feels his reputation speaks for itself. He enjoys the work, which he says sometimes feels more like a "hobby." Okerfelt does not see himself retiring anytime soon.

"I know even if I retired, someone would ask me to work on something and I would do it," he said. "It is something I will always enjoy."

Okerad, which was the original name of his father's business before he closed up shop, is now carried on by the second generation of Okerfelts.

"I restarted my father's company and Okerad is an abbreviation for Okerfelt Advertising," he said. Clarence Okerfelt passed away in 1995.

Okerfelt moved to Duxbury in 1987 after growing up in Weymouth. He has a grown daughter who resides in Texas and a son who also lives in Duxbury.

The most thrilling part of his career is the lack of performance pressure on the job, he said.

"I enjoy what I am doing. Some people have their morning coffee to start their day and I just wake up, have my hobby ... it's my main source of income but always enjoyable," he said.

Okerfelt is a member of the Sign Painters Local Union 391 out of Roslindale. Unintimidated by heights or the challenge of applying his work in unique circumstances, he doesn't feel there is anything terrifying or difficult with his line of work.

"Three hundred feet in the air, standing on the ground or walking a thin piece of steel, it's all the same," he said. "I have taken a couple of minor falls, but no major broken bones or anything."

One place you won't find Okerfelt is sitting on the beach, sketching.

"I don't really paint pictures or just sit and draw for

hours," he said. "There is a lot of time in sitting and sketching at the beach. If I am on the beach I will relax. I like to design and be specific to reproduce and get my hands on the installations."

Locally he can be found in East Bridgewater at Merchant Signs, painting trucks and murals for commercial vehicles.

"I can pretty much paint on anything," he said. "Trees, rugs, trade show grass, the beach — if you bring me a mound of sand, mounted on a piece of plywood, I could actually letter on it."

Okerfelt said he has no time for slowing down — there is a whole world of paint out there, and he intends to use it.